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# **Body boundary and primary process language in discourse of religious-mystical and psychotic altered states of consciousness**

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## **Abstract**

The awareness of physical boundaries and their relationship to psychological dimensions has recently encouraged a greater interest in the linguistic enquiry of altered states of consciousness (ASC). In particular, experiences of religious-mystical and psychotic ASC have been associated to common phenomenological features, including changes in body boundary awareness and the Freudian (1900) principle of primary process functioning (Prince & Savage, 1966).

Previous empirical research employing computer-assisted content analysis focussed predominantly on the frequencies and regularity patterns of body boundary imagery and primary process language in religious texts (Wilson, 2009; West, 1991) and language of individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia (West & Martindale, 1988; Fisher, 1970). Surprisingly, linguistic research has not assessed to what extent body boundary imagery and primary process language differ and overlap linguistically in discourse of mystical and psychotic ASC.

Consequently, the present study aimed to assess the strength of associations between body boundary imagery and primary process language in the discourse of mystical and psychotic ASC. It was predicted that body boundary imagery and primary process language would be positively associated in both discourse types. The mystical discourse was based on the English translation of Saint Teresa of Avila's (1567) *"The Way of Perfection"* and the psychotic discourse was based on the English translation of Daniel Paul Schreber's (1903) autobiographical writing *"Memoirs of My Nervous Illness"*. The latter text specifically formed the basis of Freud's (1911) classical case study on paranoid schizophrenia, whereas Saint Teresa of Avila has been regarded as one of the principal Spanish mystics of 16<sup>th</sup> century and a key figure in the reform of the Carmelite order.

The Body Type Dictionary (BTD) (Wilson, 2006) assessed the frequency of body boundary imagery and the Regressive Imagery Dictionary (RID) (Martindale, 1975, 1990) measured the frequency of primary process language. The RID and BTD were applied to both discourse types through the use of the PROTAN content analysis software program (Hogenraad et al., 2003), which calculated the occurrences of body boundary and primary process language within the segments of the mystical (N = 43) and psychotic text (N = 31). The results indicated that the psychotic text used higher frequencies of penetration imagery,  $z = -2.92$ ,  $p < .01$ , and primary process language,  $z = -6.88$ ,  $p < .001$ , as compared to the mystical text. Consistent with the research hypothesis and previous research assumption (Wilson, 2009), penetration imagery was highly positive associated with primary process language,  $\tau = .29$ ,  $p < .01$ , in the religious-mystical text. The psychotic text reflected a highly positive association between penetration imagery and barrier imagery only,  $\tau = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ , and thus the research hypothesis was partly rejected.

The presentation will draw on contemporary psychoanalytic literature and psychological theories to discuss the function of body boundary awareness and primary process cognition in religious-mystical experiences and formal schizoid thought disorder.

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# Body boundary imagery and primary process language in discourse of religious-mystical and psychotic altered states of consciousness

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## Introduction



- The relationship between religion and psychiatry has been marked with much tension and disagreement.
  - Sigmund Freud (1927) - “recognition of terrifying helplessness in childhood...and the need for protection which was originally provided by the father”
  - Albert Ellis (1980) - “emotional disturbance, irrational thinking, inflexibility & intolerance”

## Religious and psychotic ASC



- Freud (1900) suggested that primary and secondary process thought represent distinct modes of cognitive functioning
  - Primary process thinking - concrete, irrational, free-associative, unrelated to logic, time and spatial constraints, and free of social and moral conventions, main awareness in young children
  - Secondary process thinking - abstract, grammar and logic, time and space, social conventions, main awareness in older children and adults

## Religious and psychotic ASC



- Regressive Imagery Dictionary (RID) (Martindale, 1975, 1990)
  - Night journey narratives and hero's soul journey narratives
  - West & Martindale (1988) - speech of individuals diagnosed with psychotic disorders vs. non-psychotic and other disorders
- West (1991) - King James Bible
  - Evelyn Underhill's (1911) five-stage model of spiritual development in Christian mysticism

## Religious and psychotic ASC



- Body boundary awareness “oceanic feeling”
- Barrier and penetration imagery personality (Fisher & Coupland, 1956)
  - High and low boundary personality
  - Speech of individuals with psychotic disorders has more barrier and fewer penetration imagery vs. non-psychotic and other disorders
- Body Type Dictionary (BTD) (Wilson, 2006)
  - Wilson (2009) Douay-Rheims Bible - five stage pattern of body boundary imagery

## Aims of this study



- To what extent overlap and differ discourses of mystical and psychotic ASC?
  - Frequency of primary process language and body boundary imagery
  - Strength of association between primary process language and body boundary imagery



## Method

- RID & BTD applied with PROTAN
- Religious-mystical text
  - Saint Teresa of Avila's (1567) *"Way of Perfection"*
- Psychotic text
  - Daniel Paul Schreber's (1903) *"Memoirs of My Nervous Illness"*
  - Freud's (1911) classic case study on paranoid schizophrenia
  - Robert Klein (1976) cluster analysis
  - Greame Martin (2008) thematic analysis of wonders



## Results

- Mystical text > Psychotic text
  - Emotion imagery
  - Anxiety imagery
  - Affection imagery
  - Glory imagery
- Psychotic text > Mystical text
  - Penetration imagery
  - Primary process language
  - Icarian imagery
  - Narcissism imagery
  - Expressive behaviour imagery

## Results



- **Mystical text**
  - Penetration imagery was highly positive associated with primary process language
  - Penetration imagery was highly positive association with Icarian imagery
- **Psychotic text**
  - Barrier and penetration imagery were highly positive associated
  - Penetration imagery was moderately positive associated with aggression imagery
  - Barrier imagery was moderately positive associated with glory imagery

## Conclusion



- Transience of religious-mystical experience vs. permanence of psychotic illness
  - Narcissism imagery and expressive behaviour imagery
  - Penetration imagery and primary process language
  - Reparative function of religious-mystical experiences
- Pathological object relationship
  - Emotional responsiveness in high and low boundary awareness
  - Klein's (1946) paranoid-schizoid position
  - Hopper (2003) ambivalence of intimacy in contact-shunning crustacean and merger-hungry amoeboid personality
  - E.g., Schreber's relationship with objects



**Dziekuje!**  
**Thank you!**

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